The Mother and the Father

W. D. HOWELLS

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THE MOTHER AND THE FATHER

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[See page 23

"THERE, NOW, I DO NOT FEEL SO MUCH AFRAID"

THE MOTHER AND THE FATHER

DRAMATIC PASSAGES

BY

W. D. HOWELLS

ILLUSTRATED

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I

THE MOTHER

I

THE MOTHER

In the upper chamber of a village house a young mother lying in bed with her new-born baby on her arm. A nurse moving silently about the room, and putting the last touches of order to its disorder, opens the door softly, and goes out. THE MOTHER *looks up at* THE FATHER, *who stands looking down on her.*

THE MOTHER:

"Is the nurse gone now? And are we alone
At last?"

THE FATHER:

"Yes, dearest, she is gone; and I
Must leave you, too. You must be quiet, now."

THE MOTHER:

"Yes, now I will be quiet." *After a moment:* "Dear!"

THE FATHER, *turning at the door:*

"Yes, dear?"

THE MOTHER:

"See her, how cunningly she nestles down,
As naturally as if she had been used
To doing it for years. How old she looks! How wise!"

THE MOTHER *rubs her cheek softly against the baby's head, and then draws back her face to look at it.* THE FATHER *comes and stands beside the bed, looking down on the child.*

"How much do you suppose she really knows?"

THE FATHER:

"If she has newly come from heaven, our home,
As Wordsworth says, then she knows everything
We have forgotten, but shall know again,
When we go back to heaven with her."

THE MOTHER:

"Yes."

She rubs her cheek on the baby's head again.

"Do you believe it?"

THE FATHER:

"Why, of course I do.
Why, what a—"

THE MOTHER:

"Nothing. Only, I was thinking
That earth was good enough for me, and wishing
That we might all go on forever here."

"I SEEM ALL ROLLED AND LAPPED IN ENDLESS PEACE"

THE FATHER, *laughing, and then anxiously:*

"Well, I should not object. But now, my dear,
If you keep on this talking, I am afraid
You will excite yourself. The doctor said—"

THE MOTHER:

"Why, I was never calmer in my life!
I seem all rolled and lapped in endless peace.
I feel as if there never could be pain,
Or trouble, or weakness, in the world again.
I am as strong! But, yes, I understand,
And, to please you, I will be quiet now."

She sighs restfully. THE FATHER *stoops and kisses her and then the child.*

"I wish that you could somehow make one kiss
Do for us both!"

THE FATHER:

"Well, I should like to try,
Sometime, but now—"

THE MOTHER:

"Yes, now I must be quiet.
Go!" *He turns toward the door.* "Dear!" *He turns again.*

THE FATHER:

"Yes, dearest!"

THE MOTHER:

"But I shall not sleep."

THE FATHER, *anxiously:*

"You ought to sleep. The doctor said—"

THE MOTHER, *impatiently:*

"The doctor!
I'd like to know what does the doctor know!
Does he expect I'll let him take from me
A moment of this bliss and give it up
To stupid sleep? Why, I want every instant,
To share it all with you, and keep it ours!
If I found I was drowsing, I should scream
And wake myself."

THE FATHER:

"Yes, dearest love, I know!
I understand just how you feel. I feel
Just so myself. But now, to keep it ours,
You must do nothing that will make you sick—"

THE MOTHER:

"And die? Oh yes! But what if I should die?
I have had my baby! What if I should die?"

THE FATHER, *wringing his hands*:

"Dearest, how can you?"

THE MOTHER:

"Sometimes I thought I must.
But then I set my teeth, and would not die!
Nothing could make me die till I had seen her.
But now that I have seen her, I could die.
How do I know but life might take from love
Something that death would leave it!"

THE FATHER, *ruefully*:

"But you said,
Only a moment since, that you were wishing
That we might all go on forever here."

THE MOTHER:

"Yes, there is that view of it. Do not be
Afraid! I shall not die. There, go away,
And I will try to sleep. Or no, sit down,
Here by the bed. I will not speak a word.
But it will be more quieting with you
Beside us, than if you were there, outside,
Where neither one of us could see you. She
Wants you as much as I."

THE FATHER, *doubtfully, drawing up a chair and then sinking into it*:

"What an idea!"

THE MOTHER:

"Can't you believe, that through each one of us
She sees and wishes for the other one?
Of course she does!"

THE FATHER:

"Perhaps."

THE MOTHER:

"There's no perhaps.
She'll live her life outside of ours too soon;
And that is why I cannot bear to lose
An instant while she lives it still in ours.
I hate the thought of sleeping. I should like
To keep awake till she can talk and walk;
Then I could sleep forever."

She suddenly puts out the hand of the arm under the baby's head and clutches the father's hand.

"Where did she
Come from? I do not mean her body or its breath.
That came from us. But oh, her soul, her soul!
Where did that come from?"

THE FATHER *is silent, and she pulls convulsively at his hand.*

"Can't you answer me?"

THE FATHER, *in distress*:

"How can I tell you such a thing as that?
You know as well as I. Somewhere in space,
Somewhere in God, she was that which might be,
Amidst the unspeakable infinitude
Of those that dwell there in the mystery,
From everlasting unto everlasting."

THE MOTHER, *without releasing her hold*:

"Well?"

THE FATHER, *with a groan:*

"And then our love had somehow power upon her,
And blindly chose her, that she might become
A living soul, and know, feel, think like us.
It chose her, what she shall be to the end,
Or rather she was somehow chosen for it."

THE MOTHER, *still clutching his hand*:

"Out of that infinite beatitude,
Where there is nothing of the consciousness
That we call this and that, here, in the world?
That ignorantly suffers and that dies,
After the life-long fear of death, and goes
Helplessly into that unconsciousness
Again?"

THE FATHER :

"She is under the same law as we.
But what the law is, or why it should be,
She knows no less or more than we ourselves.
Why do you make me say such things to you?"

THE MOTHER, *dreamily:*

"You say our love compelled her to come here.
But, where our baby was, she was so safe!

And if there was no care for her in space,
Or any love, as here sometimes there seems
No care or love for us, where we are left
So to ourselves, our baby never knew it."

THE FATHER, *in anguish:*

"You want to break my heart."

THE MOTHER:

"My own is broken."

THE FATHER:

"And are you sorry she has come to us?
You are not glad to have our baby here?
You would rather it had been some other life
Summoned to fill up other lives than ours?
You do not care, then, for our little one?"

THE MOTHER, *solemnly:*

"So much that you cannot imagine it.
I was her life; and now she is my life,
My very life, so that if hers went out
Mine would go out with it in the same breath!
That's how I care."

THE FATHER, *beseechingly:*

"Oh, try for her sake, then,
If not for yours or mine, to keep from thinking
These dreadful thoughts!"

THE MOTHER:

"It is not I who think.
It thinks itself. Perhaps the baby thinks it."

THE FATHER:

"I don't know what to say to you, my dear!
You are right to think; but if some other time—"

THE MOTHER:

"When other children come? No, no! Now! now!
Another time would be no miracle,
And I must try to find the meaning out,
While this is still a miracle to me,
As much as morning or the springtime is.
You, if you wish, can drug your thoughts, and sleep;
But my thoughts are so precious that if I
Should lose the least of them— What time is it?"

She follows him keenly, as he takes out his watch.

THE FATHER, *with a sigh:*

"Daylight, almost. Hark! You can hear the cocks."

THE MOTHER, *smiling:*

"How sweet it is to hear them crowing so!
It is our own dear earth that seems to speak
In the familiar sound. If it were summer,
The birds would be beginning to sing, now.
I'm glad it is not summer. Is it snowing
As hard as ever? Look!"

THE FATHER, *going to the window and peering out:*

"No, it is clear,
And the full moon is shining."

THE MOTHER, *lifting her head a little:*

"Let me see!"

With a long sigh, as he draws the curtain.

"Yes, it is the moon. The same old moon
We used to walk beneath when we were lovers.
Do you suppose that it was really we?"

She lets her head drop.

THE FATHER:

"If this is we."

THE MOTHER:

"It seems a year, almost,
Since yesterday—for now this is to-morrow.
Does the time seem as long to you, I wonder?"

THE FATHER, *coming back to her:*

"Longer. I had to see you suffer and not help you."

THE MOTHER, *taking his hand again:*

"I did not mind it; I was glad to suffer.
You must not mind it either."

After a moment:

"If she could live
Forever on the earth, and we live with her,
I should not mind our having brought her here.

The life of earth, it seems so beautiful,
Far more than anything imaginable
Of any life elsewhere. They cannot hear
Anything like the crowing of the cocks
In heaven—so drowsy and so drowsing! Hark,
How thin and low and faint it is! Oh, sweet,
Sweeter than voices of antiphonal angels,
Answering one another in the skies,
They keep on calling in the dim, warm barns,
With the kind cattle underneath their roosts,
Munching the hay, and sighing, rich and soft.
I used to hear it when I was a child,
And the milk hoarsely drumming in the pails.
I hope that she will live to love these things,
Dear simple things of our dear simple earth.
Do not you, dearest?"

THE FATHER:

"Yes, indeed I do.
And now if only you could get some sleep—"

THE MOTHER:

"Well, I will try. I will be quiet now.
How quietly she sleeps! She wants to set
A good example to her wicked mother.
Mother! Just think of it!"

THE FATHER:

"And father! Think
Of that!"

THE MOTHER:

"Yes, I have thought of that too, dear.
Put your lips down and kiss her little head."

As THE FATHER *bends over her:*

"There, now, with your face between hers and mine,
You can be kissing both."

As he lifts himself:

"I was just thinking,
What if, instead of our blind, ignorant love,
Choosing her out of the infinitude
Of those unconsciousnesses, as we call them—
She, in the wisdom she had right from God,
Had chosen us, in spite of knowing us
Better than we can ever know ourselves,
In all our wickedness and foolishness,
To be her father and her mother here,
Because she understood the good that she
Could do us, and be safe from harm of us:
Would you like that?"

THE FATHER:

"Far better than to think
She came because we ignorantly willed."

THE MOTHER:

"Well, now, perhaps, that is the way it was.
Only—"

THE FATHER

"What, dearest?"

THE MOTHER:

"Oh, I do not know
If I can make you understand. Men cannot.
But if she came from Him, and if He knew
That was her errand, why did He make no sign,
Or send some of His angels down to say?"

THE FATHER:

"Perhaps she was herself His angel."

THE MOTHER:

"Now,
You have said it! I hoped you would say that.
It always seemed so commonplace, before,
But now, the rarest, the most precious truth.
It was not only wishing first to see her,
And willing not to die till I had seen her,
That helped me live through all that agony.
But in the very midst and worst of it
There was a kind of—I can never express it!—
Waiting and expectation of a message!
What will the message be?"

THE FATHER:

"Something, perhaps,
That never can be put in words, on earth,
But that we still shall feel the meaning of.
And at the last shall come to understand
As we have always felt it."

THE MOTHER, *after a moment:*

"There was something—
I wish that I could tell you—through it all,
Confusion, or transfusion, I do not know,
As if the child was I, and I was it,
And I myself was being born— You'll think
That I am crazy!"

THE FATHER:

"No, indeed! Go on!"

THE MOTHER:

"Oh, there is nothing more. I felt as if
It was I coming into another world,
Where I had never been before. And this,
This is the other world!"

THE FATHER:

"I do not understand."

THE MOTHER, *sadly:*

"I was afraid of that. And I shall hurt you
If I explain."

THE FATHER:

"No, no! You will not hurt me,
Or, if you do, it will be for my good."

THE MOTHER, *after a moment:*

"An hour ago, one little hour ago,
If it has been even an hour ago,

You were the whole of love, and now you are
The least and last of it, and lost in it.
It is as if you went out of that world,
With that old self of mine, when this new self
Came with our baby here. There, now, I knew it!
I knew that I should hurt you, darling!"

THE FATHER:

"No.
I am not hurt, and I can understand.
I would not have it different. I should hate
Myself if I could make you care for me
In that old way. It did seem beautiful,
And pure, and holy, and it seemed unselfish.
But this—this!"

He bends over the mother and child, and gathers them both into his arms.

THE MOTHER, *putting her hand on his head, and gently smoothing it:*

"There, you'll wake the baby, dearest.
How strange is seems, my saying that already!
But now I am so sleepy, and the doctor
Said that I ought to sleep. You will not mind
If baby and I drive you out of the room?
I must be quiet now. You are not wounded?"

She stretches her hand toward him as he rises and turns toward the door.

THE FATHER, *catching her hand to his mouth:*

"No, no. I am glad you are sleepy. Sleep is the best thing.
The doctor said so—"

THE MOTHER, *drowsily:*

"Then I will go to sleep.
Father, good-night!"

THE FATHER, *joyously:*

"No, no; good-morning, mother!"

II

THE FATHER AND THE MOTHER

II

THE FATHER AND THE MOTHER

The best room of a village house, after the bride and groom have gone, and the wedding guests have left the father and the mother of the bride alone. They are a pair in later middle life, with hair beginning to be gray. THE FATHER *stands at the window staring out.* THE MOTHER *goes restively about noting this thing and that.*

THE MOTHER:

"I thought we never should be rid of them!
The laughing, and the screaming, and the chatter,
I thought, would drive me wild. Now they are gone,
And I can breathe a little while before
I begin putting things in place again.
But what confusion! I should think a whirlwind
Had swept the whole house through, up stairs and down.
It seemed as if those people had no mercy.
And she, before that wall of roses there,
Standing through all so patient and so gentle,
And smiling so on every one that came

To shake hands with her, or to kiss her—white
As the white dress she wore! Ah, no one knew,
As I knew, what it cost her to keep up.
I knew her heart was aching for the home
That she was leaving, so that when it came
To the good-bye, I almost felt it break
Against my own. Dearest, you do believe
He will be good to her? You do believe—
What are you looking at out of the window?"

THE FATHER, *without turning:*

"At the old slippers they threw after her.
The rice lies in the road as thick as snow."

THE MOTHER:

"Those silly customs, how I hate them all!
But if they help to keep our thoughts away—
You do see something else!"

THE FATHER:

"No, nothing else.
I was just wondering if I might not hear
The whistle of their train."

THE MOTHER:

"And you have heard it?"

THE FATHER:

"Not yet."

THE MOTHER

"Then come and sit down here by me,
And tell me how it was when we were married."

He comes slowly from the window and stands before her.

"Do you suppose I looked as pale as she did?
I know I did not! I was sure of you
For life and death. Why do you not sit down?"

He sinks absently beside her on the sofa. She pulls his arm round her waist.

"There, now, I do not feel so much afraid!"

THE FATHER:

"Afraid of what?"

THE MOTHER:

"How can I tell you what?
Afraid for her of all that I was then
So radiantly glad of for myself.
Do you believe we really were so happy?
I was one craze of hope and trust in you,
But was that happiness? Do you believe
He will be good to her as you have been
To me?"

THE FATHER:

"Oh yes."

THE MOTHER:

"Why do you answer so,
Sighing like that?"

THE FATHER:

"Because men are not good,
As women are."

THE MOTHER:

"Yes, I kept thinking that
Through the whole service, when the promises
He made seemed broken in the very making.
How little we know about him! A few months
Since she first saw him, and we give her to him
As trustfully as if we had known him always."

THE FATHER:

"And we ourselves, *we* had not known each other
Longer than they when we were married."

THE MOTHER:

"Oh,
But that was different!"

THE FATHER:

"No, it was the same
And it was like most of the marriages
That have been and that shall be to the end.
They liked the charm of strangeness in each other."

THE MOTHER:

"But men and women are quite strange enough,
Merely as men and women, to each other,

When they have lived their whole lives long together.
And we ourselves, we took too many chances.
I did not think you ever would be harsh,
And when you spoke the first harsh word to me—
I believe, if he is ever unkind to her,
That I shall know it, wherever it may be.
She will come to me somehow in her grief,
And let me comfort her poor ghost with mine,
For it would kill us both. Do you suppose—
Do you believe he ever will be harsh
With her?"

THE FATHER:

"I almost think you ask me that
Just to torment me."

THE MOTHER:

"There, that is so like you!
You cannot talk of her as if she were
A woman after all. But, I can tell you,
She in her turn can bear all I have borne;
And though she seems so frail and sensitive,
She is not one to break at a mere touch.
But men are that way, I have noticed it;
They think their wives can endure everything,
Their daughters nothing. You are not listening!"

THE FATHER:

"Yes, I am listening. What is it you mean?"

THE MOTHER:

"You are tenderer of your children than your wives
Because you love what is yourselves in them,
And you must love somebody else in us.
Cannot you give me a moment's sympathy
Now when I have nobody left but you?
What are your thinking of, I'd like to know?"

THE FATHER, *going back to the window, and kneeling on the window-seat, with his forehead against the pane:*

"The night when she was born."

THE MOTHER:

"I knew it! I
Was thinking of it too, and how it seemed
As if she had somehow chosen us to be
Her father and her mother."

THE FATHER:

"Why not him,
Then, for her husband, by a mystery
As sacred?"

THE MOTHER:

"Oh, why do you ask? Because
There is no other world, now, as there was
Then, where the mystery could shape itself—

No hitherto, as there is no hereafter.
We have destroyed it for ourselves and her,
And love for all of us is as much a thing
Of earth as death itself."

THE FATHER:

"I never said
That world did not exist."

THE MOTHER:

"Oh no; you only
Said that you did not know, and I have only
Bettered your ignorance a little and said
I knew. Women must have some faith or other
Even if they make a faith of disbelief;
They cannot halt half-way in yes and no;
And she is more like me than you in that,
Though she is like you in so many things.
That shattered fantasy—or, what you please—
Cannot be mended now and used again;
And howsoever she has chosen him—
Or, if you like, he has been chosen for her—
The choice is made between his love and ours.
The home she seemed to bring, then, when she came,
Now she is gone, it lies here in the dust.
Oh, I can pick the house up, after while,
But never pick the home up, while I live!
Well, let it be! I suppose you will call it
Nature, and preach that cold philosophy

Of yours: that every home is founded on
The ruin of some other home and shall be
The ruin out of which still other homes
Shall grow in turn, and so on to the end.
I find no comfort in it, and my heart
Aches for the child that is not less my child
Because she is her husband's wife. Oh yes,
If we were two fond optimistic fools,
I dare say we should sit here in this horror,
And hold each other's hands and smile to think
Of what a brilliant wedding it had been;
How everybody said how well she looked,
And how he was so handsome and so manly;
And try to follow them in imagination
To their new house, and settle them in it;
And say how soon we should be hearing from her,
And then how soon they would come back to us
Next summer. But we have not been that kind.
We have always said the things we really thought,
And not shrunk from the facts; and now I face them,
And say this wedding-- Hark! Was that their train?"

THE FATHER:

"It is the freight mounting the grade. Their train
Is overdue, but it will soon be there."

THE MOTHER:

"If it would never come or never go!
If all the worlds that whir around the sun

Could stop, and none of them go on again!
Once I had courage for us both, and now
You ought to have it. Oh, say something, do,
To help me bear it!"

THE FATHER:

"What is it I should say?"

THE MOTHER:

"That it has been all my own doing! Say
That I would have it, and am like the mothers,
The stupid mothers, still uncivilized,
That wish their daughters married for the sake
Of being married: that would help me bear it.
If you blamed me then I could blame you too,
And say you wished it quite as much as I."

THE FATHER:

"We neither of us wished it, and I think
We have always blamed each other needlessly."

THE MOTHER:

"Yes, and I cannot bear it as I used
When she was with us. Now that she is gone
And you are all in all to me again,
Dearest, you must be very good to me.
Did you hear something?"

THE FATHER, *going to the window:*

"Yes, I thought I heard
The coming of their train: but it was nothing."

THE MOTHER, *unheedingly:*

"The worst of all was having to part so—
Hurried and fluttered—up there in her room,
Where she had been so long our little child,
And with that hubbub going on down here,
Not realize that we were parting. Oh,
If we could only have had a little time
And quiet for it! Hark! What noise was that?"

THE FATHER:

"What noise?"

THE MOTHER:

"Something that sounded like a voice!
Her voice! I know it must have been her voice!"
She rushes to the window and stares out.
"I always knew within my heart that she
Would call for me, if any unhappiness
Greater than she could bear should come to her."

THE FATHER:

"But what unhappiness—"

THE MOTHER:

"A tone, a look!"

THE FATHER:

"With our arms round her yet? He could not. That
Would be against nature."

THE MOTHER:

"Nature! How you men
Are always talking about Nature! Little
You understand her! Nature flatters men.
She gives men mastery and health and life,
And women subjection, weakness, pain, and death.
We know what Nature is, and you know nothing.
She takes our youth and wastes it upon you,
She steals our beauty for you, and she uses
Our love itself to enslave us to you. Nature!"

THE FATHER:

"Has it been really so with you and me?"

THE MOTHER:

"How do I know? You may have been unlike
Other men."

THE FATHER:

"No, but quite like other men;
Not better. Shall she take her chance with him?
Speak out now from the worst you know of me,
And say if you would have her back again."

THE MOTHER:

"It keeps on calling! Can it be her voice?"

THE FATHER:

"Then say it is her voice. What will you answer?
Shall she come home and be our child again?"

THE MOTHER:

"You put it all on me!"

THE FATHER:

"Then if I take
The burden all upon myself, and choose—"

THE MOTHER:

"What?"

THE FATHER:

"That her longing for us should have power
To bring her back?"

THE MOTHER:

"To say good-bye again?"

THE FATHER:

"To stay and never say good-bye again,
To leave her husband and to cleave to us."

THE MOTHER:

"I cannot let you choose! For oh! it seems
That it would really happen if you chose.
Wait, wait a minute, while I try to think
How would it be if she came back again,
And crept once more into this empty shell
Of life that has been lived! What is there here
But two old hearts that hardly have enough

"SHE MUST TAKE HER CHANCE, AS I TOOK MINE"

Of love left for each other? And she needs
The whole of such love as I found in you
When I had given you all the love I had.
No, she must go with him as I with you.
Because she has been all in all to us
So long, and yet for such a little time,
We have come to think that she must be unlike
Others, and she must be above their fate.
But that is foolish. She must take her chance,
As I took mine, and as we women have
Taken our chance from the beginning. There!
I give her up for the first time and last!
Tell her— I talk as if you were with her
There, and not here with me!"

THE FATHER:

"And I—I feel
As if we both were there with her and with
Each other here."

THE MOTHER:

"And so we shall be always;
And most with her when most we are alone.
See, they have mounted to their train together!
She stands a moment at the door and waves
The hand that is not held in his toward us—
And they are gone into their unknown world
To find our own past in their future there!

III

THE FATHER

III

THE FATHER

In the parlor of a village house, with open doors and windows. THE FATHER *and* THE MOTHER, *an elderly man and woman, sitting alone among chairs in broken rows. There is a piano with lifted lid; dust is tracked about the floor.*

THE FATHER:

"Now it is over."

THE MOTHER:

"It is over, now,
And we shall never see her any more."

THE FATHER:

"Have you put everything of hers away?
If I found anything that she had worn,
Or that belonged to her, I think the sight
Would kill me."

THE MOTHER:

"Oh, you need not be afraid;
I have put everything away."

THE FATHER:

"Oh, me!
How shall we do without her! It is as if
One of my arms had been lopt off, and I
Must go through life a mutilated man.
This morning when I woke there was an instant,
A little instant, when she seemed alive,
Before the clouds closed over me again,
And death filled all the world. Then came that stress,
That horrible impatience to be done
With what had been our child. As if to hide
The cold white witness of her absence were
To have her back once more!"

THE MOTHER:

"I felt that, too.
I thought I could not rest till it was done;
And now I cannot rest, and we shall rest
Never again as long as we shall live.
Our grief will drug us, yes, and we shall sleep,
As we have slept already; but not rest."

THE FATHER:

"We must, I cannot help believing it,
See her again some time and somewhere else."

THE MOTHER:

"Oh, never any time or anywhere!"

THE FATHER:

"You used to think we should."

THE MOTHER:

"I know I did.
But that is gone forever, that fond lie
With which we used to fool our happiness,
When we had no need of it. When we had
Each other safe we could not even imagine
Not having one another always."

THE FATHER:

"Yes,
It was a lie, a cruel, mocking lie!"

THE MOTHER:

"Why did you ask me, then? Do you suppose
That if the love we used to make believe
Would reunite us, really had the power,
It would not, here and now, be doing it,
Now, when we need her more than we shall need her
Ever in all eternity, and she—
If she is still alive, which I deny—
Is aching for us both as we for her?
You know how lost and heartsick she must be,
Wherever she is, if she is anywhere;
And if her longing, and if ours could bring us
Together, as we used to dream it could,
How soon she would be here!"

THE FATHER:

"I cannot bear it!"

THE MOTHER:

"I shall not care, when we are very old,
Years hence, and we shall have begun to be
Forgetful, as old people are, about her,
And all her looks and ways—I shall not care
To see her then: I want to see her now,
Now while I still remember everything,
And she remembers, and has all her faults
Just as we have our own, to be forgiven.
But if we have to wait till she is grown
Some frigid, faultless angel, in some world
Where she has other ties, I shall not care
To see her; I should be afraid of her."

THE FATHER:

"She would not then be she, nor we be we."

THE MOTHER:

"I want to tell her how I grieve for all
I ever did or said that was unkind
Since she was born. But if we met above,
In that impossible heaven, she would not care."

THE FATHER:

"If she knows anything she knows that now
Without your telling."

THE MOTHER:

"I want *her* to say
She knows it."

THE FATHER:

"Yet, somehow she seems alive!
The whole way home she seemed to be returning
Between us as she used, when we came home
From walking, and she was a child."

THE MOTHER:

"Oh that
Was nothing but the habit of her; just
As if you really had lost an arm
You would have felt it there."

THE FATHER:

"Oh yes, I know."

He lets his head hang in silence; then he looks up at the window opening on the porch.

"This honeysuckle's sweetness sickens me."

He rises and shuts the window.

"I never shall smell that sweetness while I live
And not die back into this day of death."

He remains at the window staring out.

"How still it is outside! The timothy
Stands like a solid wall beside the swath
The men have cut. The clover heads hang heavy
And motionless."

THE MOTHER:

"I wish that it would rain,
And lay the dust. The house is full of dust
From the road yonder. They have tracked it in
Through all the rooms, and I shall have enough
To do, getting it out again."

THE FATHER:

"The sun
Pours down its heat as if it were raining fire.
But she that used to suffer so with cold,
She cannot feel it. Did you see that woman,
That horrible old woman, chewing dill
All through the services?"

THE MOTHER:

"Oh, yes, I saw her.
You know her: Mrs. Joyce, that always comes
To funerals."

THE FATHER:

"I remember. She should be
Prevented, somehow."

THE MOTHER:

"Why, she did no harm."

THE FATHER:

"I could not bear to have them stand and stare
So long at the dead face. I hate that custom."

THE MOTHER:

"I wonder that you cared. It was not *her* face,
Nor the form hers; only a waxen image
Of what she had been. Nothing now is she!
There is no place in the whole universe
For her whose going takes all from the earth
That ever made it home."

THE FATHER:

"Yes, she is gone,
And it is worse than if she had never been—
Hark!"

THE MOTHER:

"How you startle me! You are so nervous!"

THE FATHER:

"I thought I heard a kind of shuddering noise!"

THE MOTHER:

"It was a shutter shaking in the wind."

THE FATHER:

"There is no wind."

THE MOTHER, *after a moment:*

"Go and see what it was.
It seemed like something in the room where she—"

THE FATHER:

"It sounded like the beating of birds' wings.
There! It has stopped."

THE MOTHER:

"I must know what it was.
If you will not go, I will. I shall die
Unless you go at once."

THE FATHER:

"Oh, I will go."

He goes out and mounts the stairs, which creak under his tread. His feet are heard on the floor above. After a moment comes the sound of opening and closing shutters.

THE MOTHER, *calling up:*

"What is it? Quick!"

THE FATHER, *calling down:*

"It was some kind of bird
Between the shutters and the sash."

He descends the stairs slowly, and comes into the room where THE MOTHER *sits waiting.*

"I cannot
Imagine how it got there."

THE MOTHER:

"What bird was it?"

THE FATHER:

"Some kind I did not know. I wish that I
Had let it in."

THE MOTHER:

"What do you mean by that?
Everything living tries to leave the house;
We stay because we are part of death,
And cannot go."

THE FATHER:

"It did not wish to go;
It was not trying to get out, but in.
I put it out once and it came again;
And now I wish that I had let it stay."

THE MOTHER:

"You are so superstitious; and you think" . . . .
She stops, and they both sit silent for a time.

THE FATHER:

"It may be our despair that keeps her from us."

THE MOTHER:

"You think, then, that our hope could bring her to us?"

THE FATHER:

"Not that, no."

THE MOTHER:

"Or, that we could make her live
Again by willing it sufficiently?"

THE FATHER:

"Oh no,
Not by our willing; by our loving, yes!
Not through our will, which is a part of us
And filled full of ourselves, but through our love,
Which is a part of some life else, and filled
With something not ourselves, but better, purer."

THE MOTHER:

"Well, try."

THE FATHER:

"I cannot. Your doubt palsies me."

THE MOTHER:

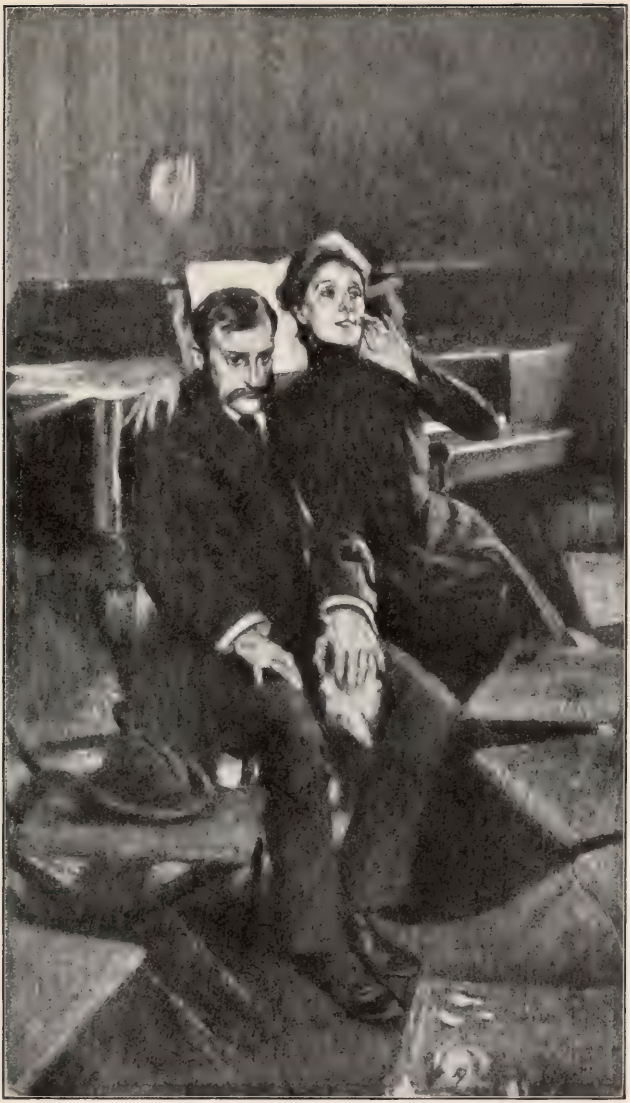
"I cannot help it. If she cannot come
Back to my doubt she cannot to my faith. . . .
Oh! What was that?"

THE FATHER:

"The wind among the chords
Of the piano. They have left it open
After the singing."

THE MOTHER:

"But there is no wind!
You said yourself, just now, there was no wind!"



"IT WAS LIKE SOMETHING HEARD WITHIN MY BRAIN"

THE FATHER:

"Perhaps it was our voices jarred the strings."

THE MOTHER:

"They could not do it; and it was not like
Anything that I ever heard before.
It was like something heard within my brain.
And there is something that I see within!
Hark! Look! Do you hear nothing? Do you see
Nothing? Or am I going wild?"

THE FATHER:

"No, no!
I hear and see it too. Are you afraid?"

THE MOTHER:

"No, not the least. But, oh, how strange it is!
What is it like—to you?"

THE FATHER:

"I dare not say
For fear that it should not be anything."

THE MOTHER:

"Do you believe that we are dreaming it?
That we are sleeping and are dreaming it?"

THE FATHER:

"*He* could not be so cruel!"

THE MOTHER:

"He made death."

THE FATHER:

"There! You have hurt it, and it will not speak;
You have offended it. Speak to it!"

THE MOTHER:

"Child,
I did not mean to grieve you. Oh, forgive
Your poor wild mother! Is she here yet, dearest?"

THE FATHER:

"Yes, she is here! Yes, I am sure of it—"

THE MOTHER:

"I seemed to have lost her— No, she is here again!
How natural she is! How strong and bright,
And all that sick look gone! It must be true
That it is she, but how shall we be sure
After it passes? Where is it you see her?
Where is it that you hear her speak?"

THE FATHER:

"Within!
Within my brain, my heart, my life, my love!"

THE MOTHER:

"Yes, that is where I see and hear her too.
And oh, I feel her! This is her dear hand

In mine! How warm and soft it is once more,
After that sickness! Yes, we have her back,
Dearest, we have our child again! But still
How strange it is that she is all within,
And nowhere outside of our minds. Can you
Make her nowhere but in yourself?"

THE FATHER

"In you—"

THE MOTHER:

"And I in you! I see her in your mind;
I hear her speaking in your mind! That shows
How wholly we are one. Our love has done it,
And we must never quarrel any more.
It was your faith; I will say that for you!
But are you sure we are not dreaming it?"

THE FATHER:

"How could we both be dreaming the same thing?"

THE MOTHER:

"We could if we are both so wholly one."

THE FATHER:

"We must not doubt, or it will cease to be.
See! It is growing faint!"

THE MOTHER:

"Oh no, my child!
I do believe that it is really you.

And, father, you must not keep saying *It*,
As if she were not living. Now she smiles,
And now she is speaking! Can you understand
What she is saying?"

THE FATHER:

"It is not in words,
And yet I understand."

THE MOTHER:

"And so do I.
I wish that you could put it into words
So that we might remember it hereafter."

THE FATHER:

"But what she says cannot be put in words.
It is enough that we can understand
Better than if it were in words."

THE MOTHER:

"No, no!
Unless it is in words, I am not sure.
Unless she calls you Father and me Mother—
Hush! Did you hear her speak?"

THE FATHER:

"I thought I heard her."

THE MOTHER:

"I am sure I heard her call us both, and now
I know it is not an hallucination.

Oh, I believe, and I am satisfied!
But, child, I wish that you could tell me something
About it—where you are! Is it like this?
In everything that I have read about it,
It seemed so vague—"

THE FATHER:

"She answers hesitating,
As we used, when she was a little thing,
To answer her in something that we thought
She would be none the happier for knowing.
We are as children with her now, and she
As father and mother to us, and we must not
Question her."

THE MOTHER:

"Yes, I must; I will, I will!"

THE FATHER:

"There, she is gone! No, she is here again!"

THE MOTHER:

"No, we are somewhere else. What place is this?
Is this where she was? Did she bring us here?
It seems as if we now were merged in her
As she was merged in us before *we* came,
But all our wills are one. Oh, mystery!
I am so lost in this strange unity;
Help me to find myself, if you are here!
You *are* here, are not you?"

THE FATHER:

"Yes, I am here,
But not as I was there. I seem a part
Of all that was and is and shall be. This is life
And that was only living yonder! I can find you,
I can find her, but not myself in it,
Or only as a drop of water may
Find itself in the indiscriminate sea."

THE MOTHER:

"I cannot bear it! I was not prepared!
Oh, save me, dearest! Save me, oh, my child!
Speak to me, father, in the words we knew,
And not in these intolerable rays
That leave the thought no refuge from itself.
I have not yet the strength to yield my own
Up to this universal happiness.
I still must dwell apart in my own life,
A prison if it need be, or a pang.
Come back with me, both of you, for a while. . . .
She starts, and stares about her.
Why, I am here again, and you are here!
This is our house, with dust in it, and death!
This is our dear, dear earthly home! But where
Is she? Call! Tell her we are here again!"

THE FATHER:

"We could not make her come. I am bewildered;
I scarcely know if I am here myself."

A moment passes in silence.

THE MOTHER:

"Perhaps she never came at all, and we
Have only dreamed that we were somewhere else.
I feel as if I had awaked from sleep.
How long were we away?"

THE FATHER:

"I cannot tell:
As long as life, or only for an instant."

THE MOTHER:

"It could not have been long, for there I see
The humming-bird poised at the honeysuckle
Still, that I noticed when we seemed to go.
Nothing has really happened; yet, somehow. . . .
I wonder what it was she said to us
That satisfied us so! Can you remember?"

THE FATHER:

"Not in words, no. It did not seem in words,
And if we tried to put it into words—"

THE MOTHER:

"They would be such as mediums use to cheat
Their dupes with, or to make them cheat themselves.
No, no! We ought not to be satisfied.
It is a trick our crazy nerves have played us.
The self-same trick has cheated both, or we

Have hypnotized each other. It is the same
As such things always have been from the first:
Our sorrow has made fools of us; we have seen
A phantom that our longing conjured up;
And heard a voice that had no sound; and thought
A meaning into mocking emptiness!"

THE FATHER:

"Then, how could it have satisfied us so?"

THE MOTHER:

"That was a part of the hallucination.
Nothing has happened, nothing has been proved!"

THE FATHER:

"Not to our reason, no, but to our love
Everything."

THE MOTHER:

"Then, let her come back again!"

THE FATHER:

"Twice would prove nothing more if once proved nothing.
We have had our glimpse of something beyond earth:
As every one who sorrows somehow has.
The world is not so hollow as it was.
There still is meaning in the universe;
But if it ever is as waste and senseless

As only now it seemed, and the time comes
When we shall need her as we needed her,
Then we shall be with her, or she with us,
Whether the time is somewhere else or here.
Come, mother—mother for eternity!—
Come, let us go, each of us, to our work.
I have been to blame for breaking you with grief
Which I should have supported you against.
Forgive me for it!"

THE MOTHER:

"Oh, what are you saying?
There is no blame and no forgiveness for it
Between us two, nothing but only love."

THE FATHER:

"The love in which she lives."

THE MOTHER:

"I will believe it
If you believe it."

THE FATHER:

"Help me to believe!"

THE END

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Howells, William Dean
The mother and the father

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